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The Book of Isaiah: A New Translation with Interpretive Keys from the Book of Mormon Avraham Gileadi

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AVRAHAM GILEADI. *The Book of Isaiah: A New Translation with Interpretive Keys from the Book of Mormon*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1988. xviii; 250 pp. \$19.95.

Reviewed by Royal Skousen, professor of English at Brigham Young University.

This book is an important milestone in LDS scriptural study. For the first time, a Latter-day Saint scholar has fully recognized the inadequacy of the outdated and archaic 1611 King James translation and has produced a completely new translation of a biblical book from an LDS point of view.

As modern readers we are familiar with the King James language of the New Testament Gospels, but other parts—especially the prophetic books of the Old Testament and Paul’s letters—remain obtuse, in part because of the rhetorical complexity of these works, but also because their language (especially in an archaic translation) is so difficult to understand. Gileadi’s goal is to translate Isaiah into modern English so that Isaiah can speak directly to us. Gileadi succeeds because his language is modern, yet elevated; it avoids slang and modernistic expressions that would detract from the seriousness of Isaiah’s message. In addition, Gileadi has striven to achieve a consistent translation of Isaiah’s terminology, thus allowing the reader to more readily see the prophetic patterns in this book.

As far as the Isaiah text goes, this book is virtually identical to Gileadi’s *The Apocalyptic Book of Isaiah*.¹ But there are important differences between the two editions. The first edition has only a brief foreword (five pages), then launches directly into the Isaiah text, and concludes with a scholarly essay entitled “An Apocalyptic Key.” This second edition, on the other hand, starts with a 93-page introduction, followed by the Isaiah text itself. I myself prefer the short foreword of the first edition, simply because the real beauty of both these editions is the Isaiah translation itself, and the first edition gets the reader into Isaiah much quicker.

Another important difference between the two editions is the intended audience. The first edition is directed towards a scholarly and non-LDS audience, whereas the second is written for a general LDS audience. Gileadi’s rhetorical arguments in his first edition have had some influence on conservative biblical scholarship. Modern Isaiah scholarship denies the single authorship of Isaiah, even though statistical analysis of the prefixal elements in Isaiah shows a unity.² Gileadi has taken a different tack and emphasizes the rhetorical unity of the Book of Isaiah, particularly its chiasmic structure. In Hassell Bullock’s words, Gileadi’s work “illustrate[s]

how a recent scholar has approached a topic considered by many other scholars to be a settled issue and has offered new insights and intriguing possibilities.”³

A third difference between the two editions is the typography. It is unfortunate that the second edition of such an important book suffers from the usual computer-generated typesetting problems found in many books today. Lack of ligatures and traditional old-style numbers, poor intercharacter spacing in the treatment of italic transcriptions, and the general lack of typographic aesthetics all disrupt the reader’s attention. These deficiencies were not present in the first edition, thanks to the excellent work of Tamara and Thomas K. Hinckley, who designed and typeset the first edition. The type in the first edition is much more readable than the awkward cutting of Garamond used in the second edition.⁴

In the introduction to the second edition, Gileadi explains the rhetorical structure of the Book of Isaiah for an LDS audience. Gileadi’s insights are interesting, but for some reason I found the reading slow going. The analysis in the first edition is more spartan and for me much easier to read. In particular, in this new edition, I found the sample verse-by-verse commentary on chapter 28 of Isaiah unnecessary. This is not a criticism of Gileadi’s analysis of chapter 28, but simply my own predilection for reading the actual text rather than an expansionary and paraphrastic commentary. The real reason Gileadi’s book succeeds is the translation itself: Isaiah can finally be understood *without* the use of an extensive commentary!

Gileadi’s main goal is to achieve a meaningful text. His basic text is the traditional Masoretic text (MT) of Isaiah, but he also uses the Septuagint (LXX) and the Qumran Isaiah (1QIsa^a) in order to clear up difficult passages in the Masoretic text. He also considers some alternatives from the Isaiah passages in the Book of Mormon, as in the following example (which conflates readings from the Masoretic text and the Septuagint):

Isaiah 2:16, King James Version (from the Masoretic text):

And upon all the ships of Tarshish, and upon all pleasant pictures.

Isaiah 2:16, Septuagint:

and upon every ship of the sea, and upon every display of fine ships.⁵

2 Nephi 12:16 (conflated):

And upon all the ships of the sea, and upon all the ships of Tarshish, and upon all pleasant pictures.

Isaiah 2:16, Gileadi’s version (also conflated):

against [all vessels at sea,]^c
both merchant ships^d and pleasure craft.

^c16 So LXX; not in MT.

^d16 Hebrew *ships of Tarshish*.

Gileadi also emends the text in places where the original makes little sense. Some of his emendations are based on plausible transcriptional errors in the original consonantal text of Isaiah; others are based on alternatives to the traditional Masoretic assignment of vowels to the consonantal text.

In order to make more sense out of the text, Gileadi sometimes transposes the order of words, phrases, lines, and verses. The main motivation for each transposition is, it would appear, to make sense out of a passage, but unlike the consonant and vowel emendations there often seems to be little independent motivation for reordering. One particularly interesting transposition occurs in Isaiah 53:9. Here Gileadi transposes phrases apparently in order to increase the parallels with Jesus' death and burial:

Isaiah 53:9, King James Version (from the Masoretic text):

And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death;

Isaiah 53:9, Gileadi's version:

He was appointed among the wicked in death,^a
among the rich was his burial;^b

^{a9, b9} Terms transposed; appear reversed in text. Compare 14:20 and the lack of a burial for the wicked and violent Tyrant.

In each instance, Gileadi warns us when he does emend or transpose the text. And he gives reasons for his conjectures.

There are a few infelicities in Gileadi's poetic translation. Sometimes he produces nonparallel English that is hard to read:

You may take courage in one another,
but shall be in fear;
you may arm yourselves,
but shall be terrorized. (8:9)

Many will stumble into them,
and when they fall shall be broken,
and when they become ensnared
shall be taken captive. (8:15)

A suckling infant will play near the adder's den,
and the toddler reach his hand
over the viper's nest. (11:8)

In a few places Gileadi uses obscure or archaic words (*italics added*):

Ever trust in the Lord,
for the Lord *Yah* is an everlasting Rock. (26:4)

Thus says the Lord, your Maker,
who formed you from the womb and *succored* you:
(44:2)

A few of his words suggest a modern interpretation (*italics added*):

It shall ignite the jungle forests,
and they shall billow upward
in *mushrooming* clouds of smoke. (9:18) [Atomic bombs?]

What will you do in the day of reckoning
when the *holocaust* overtakes you from afar? (10:3)
[The Jewish holocaust during World War II?]

Therefore, though you plant choice crops
and sow *hybrid* seed . . . (17:10) [Modern genetics?]

Like tornadoes sweeping through the South,
they come from the *steppes*, a land of terror. (21:1)
[The steppes of Russia?]

High rises and panoramic *resorts*
shall become haunts for ever after. (32:13) [Modern architecture?]

To them I will give a *handclasp* and a name within the walls of my
house. (56:5) [Temple rites?]

Despite these few interpretative translations, Gileadi's translation contains many marvelous expressions:

If you are willing and obey,
you shall eat the good of the land.
But if you are unwilling and disobey,
you shall be eaten by the sword. (1:19–20)

Woe to those drawn to sin by vain attachments,
hitched to transgression like a trailer. (5:18)

For the godless utter blasphemy;
their heart ponders impiety:
how to practice hypocrisy and preach
perverse things concerning the Lord,
leaving the hungry soul empty,
depriving the thirsty soul of drink. (32:6)

In all, Gileadi has produced a wonderful translation. When I sit down to read Isaiah, I choose Gileadi.

NOTES

¹Avraham Gileadi, *The Apocalyptic Book of Isaiah: A New Translation with Interpretative Key* (Provo: Hebraeus Press, 1982).

²L. La Mar Adams, "A Scientific Analysis of Isaiah Authorship," in *Isaiah and the Prophets: Inspired Voices from the Old Testament*, ed. Monte S. Nyman (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1984), 151–63.

³C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophetic Books* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 130.

⁴I wish to thank Jonathan Skousen for these insights on the typography.

⁵This English translation of the original Greek is taken from *The Septuagint Version of the Old Testament, with an English Translation* (London: Samuel Bagster and Sons, 1879).